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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 000786

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [GG](#)
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: OPPOSITION PROTESTERS INFLATE REGIONAL
TURNOUT

REF: TBILISI 769

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (SBU) Summary: April 22 press reports that the radical opposition mustered 600-plus vehicles from the regions to join 30,000 protesters in front of Parliament were exaggerated and incorrect. Embassy observers and Ministry of Internal Affairs (MOIA) officials estimated no more than 5,000 protesters gathered on Rustaveli. MOIA counted 113 cars with protesters that came to Tbilisi from the regions. Opposition leader Tina Khidasheli said on a national talk show that the Alliance for Georgia would recruit more supporters to come to Tbilisi on April 24. Protest leaders erected more "cells" along Rustaveli and continued to block Tbilisi's main traffic circle, Freedom Square (reftel). Some protesters vandalized the entrance to the Ministry of Economic Development. Minister of Education Nika Gvaramia announced that although schools remain open, nearly 1,700 students are not attending due to entrances being blocked by protesters. NGOs continue to circulate an appeal to both sides to negotiate. The Government stated that it would take no action against the protesters as long as they remained peaceful. In a televised cabinet meeting, President Saakashvili urged his government to continue focusing on addressing the nation's economic difficulties and implementing existing development plans. In a private meeting, the Ambassador encouraged Irakli Alasania to find a way to the negotiating table. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: The radical leaders appear to be incrementally escalating the situation, trying to provoke the government into a reaction the opposition can exploit for PR purposes. Thus far, the government has held steady in this contest of nerves. By refusing to engage in any negotiation or constructive action with any GOG officials, the radicals are convincing more and more Georgians that they are not the democrats they claim to be and are merely on a quest for personal power. End Comment.

REPORTS OF PROTESTERS FROM REGION INACCURATE

¶3. (C) Protests led by the radical opposition dragged into their 14th day on April 22 (reftel). Wildly inaccurate press reports on April 22 claimed 600-plus vehicles from the regions joined 30,000 protesters in front of Parliament, repeated by several international media outlets including AP. Embassy observers on the ground and MOIA officials estimated no more than 5,000 protesters gathered on Rustaveli at the height of the day's rally. MOIA counted 113 cars with protesters that came to Tbilisi from the regions and estimated they could have contained no more than 1,000 people maximum. Reportedly, the National Forum party had coordinated most of the cars; however, the Conservatives posted a schedule on their website detailing when the convoy would travel through various western cities so others could

join. Embassy observers noted that the convoy from Western Georgia appeared larger, because the protesters were driving slowly and not allowing other drivers to pass. This led to many angry drivers honking their horns at the protesters' cars.

OPPOSITION PLANS FOR MORE

14. (C) On the Georgian Public Broadcaster's (GPB) nationwide evening talk show, Accents, Republican party activist Tina Khidasheli claimed that the protesters from the regions would stay for a week or so in Tbilisi. She said the Alliance would recruit more participants from the regions on April 24. Qwould recruit more participants from the regions on April 24.

MORE CELLS ARE ERECTED, BLOCK MAJOR SQUARE

15. (C) Meanwhile, the radical opposition leaders erected additional "cells" on Freedom Square, the key traffic circle in downtown Tbilisi. This enabled them to block a major traffic route with few people. They continued to maintain a token presence in front of the GPB office and the Presidential Residence as well. On the morning of April 23, some local residents nearby Freedom Square moved several "cells" so that traffic could pass. Opposition members replaced the "cells" after about an hour, again stopping traffic. By the afternoon, more "cells" had extended the blockage of Rustaveli by several hundred meters in the opposite direction, near the Opera Theater.

SCHOOLS OPEN, PARENTS KEEP STUDENTS AWAY

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16. (U) Nationwide TV Rustavi-2 reported that nearly 1,700 students at Tbilisi School Number One -- which is directly adjacent to Parliament -- have not attended class now for more than a week due to the protests. Other schools near the protests also have declining attendance. Education Minister Gvaramia said all schools remain open, but parents are keeping their children home to avoid the protesters. In response, some opposition leaders offered to hold an extra summer school session for the students after Saakashvili resigns and they are in power.

NGOs CALL FOR DIALOGUE

17. (SBU) On April 17, a large number of reputable Georgian NGOs issued a collective statement to all sides to negotiate (statement emailed to EUR/CARC). They applauded the GOG for showing restraint and allowing the protests to continue. The statement also called on the GOG to investigate any crimes (such as alleged beatings reported previously). Above all, it appealed to both sides to address the important issues facing the country through dialogue. To date, the opposition has not acknowledged civil society's calls for constructive negotiation, rather than only calling for Saakashvili's resignation. (Note: Nana Kakabadze signed the statement on behalf of her organization, Former Political Prisoners for Human Rights. However, Kakabadze has been an active participant -- not a speaker -- at the protests. A video on www.civil.ge shows her posing in one of the cells. End note.)

SAAKASHVILI MAINTAINS GOVERNMENT FOCUS

18. (U) President Saakashvili held a televised cabinet meeting on April 22. During the meeting he urged his ministers to continue focusing on implementing the government's various four-year development plans. These include energy, economic development, agriculture, education, healthcare, and infrastructure. Saakashvili pointed to the World Bank's announcement this week of Georgia as a top economic reformer as evidence of his policy's success. He said "in recent weeks we have proven Georgia is a stable and sustainable country, despite some attempts by internal and external

elements." He claimed his government's attention to continuing economic development would help overcome "unemployment triggered by the war and global crisis." Senior Government leaders and MOIA officials continue to maintain that they will take no action against the protesters as long as the protests remain peaceful.

AMBASSADOR URGES ALASANIA TO ENGAGE IN DIALOGUE

19. (C) In an effort to understand the plan of the opposition leaders, Ambassador met privately with Alliance for Georgia leader Irakli Alasania on April 22. Alasania maintained he wanted to engage in a dialogue with the government, but was hesitant to separate himself from other protest leaders who continue to agree on only one point for discussion with the President: his resignation. The Ambassador urged him to find a way to engage in a dialogue which would lead to a peaceful end to the protests. Alasania said that he would continue his discussions with the other protest leaders.

TEFFT